

The Distance Between Hearts

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> <meta name="Generator"> White Christmas, Red Christmas **

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The moonlight poured in through the window, kissing her hair and face. Her nightshirt was rumpled over her swollen belly. Joelle Guthrie sat on her bed, stroking her distended abdomen, as she gazed out the window in silence.

> She thought to herself in the darkness. <p>

A few more days, and this would all be over.

A few more days and she'd have Chet back.

A few more days and she'd be rid of this burden.

She looked down at her heavy, gravid form. It wouldn't be long now. Then, she turned her eyes back to the window and looked out over the snow-covered fields of her family's farmland.

No, not long now at all.

* * * * *

In spite of having spent his entire life on the run, seeing AK-47's wielded by sixteen year old kids and people dying daily, Angelo Espinosa—the mutant known as 'Skin'—found that the Guthrie Family farmhouse was more intimidating than any of these things combined.

Of course, it could be because that he was here with not only his teammate, best friend and the object of his unrequited and unknown affection for the past three yearsâ€|

But her entire family as well.

So, laying on that couch in the spare house for the migrant workers, Angelo mulled over life of late. He'd been, for lack of room in the house, been put out with Hank and Cecilia. Which was okay. Cecilia was half-Puerto Rican and as Hank was hideously multi-lingual, so not one word of English had been spoken between just the three of them.

During the midst of all this mulling, Angelo was struck with the need for nicotine. He couldn't smoke in either house, for fear that Joelle would breathe it in and it'd affect her baby. And he understood that. But that did not stop him from nic-fitting and so he got his coat and stumbled out to the porch and lit up.

No less than thirty seconds later, a rumbling basso voice said, "Young Mr. Espinosa, are you aware of the probability, that for every cigarette you contaminate your lungs with, you will perish from cancer or heart disease before reaching the wizened age of thirty?"

"Yes," Angelo sighed as the Bouncing Beast had apparently decided to interrupt his 'smoke-break', "I was. Really. And did it stop me? No! Look, the cigarette is still here in my hand! And between my lips, even!" He did indeed take another drag off the white cancer stick.

Hank clucked his tongue at the younger mutant, and took up a lean on the door, careful not to put his full weight against the old, wood frame. It'd only hold up so much! "Your self-destructive addictions aside, Angelo, how are you enjoying your Winter holiday here?" Hank asked jovially enough.

Gee, how _was _the trip going? Aside from Paige fussing with her sister about the baby and the male Guthrie's all glaring at him, it had been a right pissy start to Christmas. "It's going," was the only answer he could give.

"Oh? Not living up to your expectations?" Hank made no move from where he leaned against the door, as Angelo smoked in relative silence. Hank, however, was anything _but _quiet. "And what did you look forward too, coming out here to the country with your errant teammate?"

Angelo had to ponder that for a time. What had he been looking for? Why had he agreed? Because he wanted to get some time away with Paige? Well, then coming out here for her sister's baby was probably a bad idea. She was going to spend all her time fussing over her sister. Not that he could blame herâ€"when his sisters were getting pregnant, he tried to help them out as best he could.

What else? Did he come out here out of loyalty? Maybe. Just to get some time away from the team? Could be. Or maybeâ€| just maybeâ€| he didn't want to face Gayle and Jono.

Angelo felt quite guilty about his and Gayle's impromptu tryst out in the grotto. But he was tired of being less than loved, and Gayle was tired of waiting for a man when she feared her time was short. And so, together, they'd almost found a measure of peace.

He snorted dryly to himself. Maybe he was pursuing the wrong woman.

"Angelo? Has the snow filled your ears and rendered you deaf?"

Hank's voice jarred him back to reality quietly, and he glanced up. "Sorry," he said, flipping his cigarette out into the snow, "I was a million miles away."

Hank's furry face turned down to the thin Latino boy, "Angelo? Is there something the matter?" his thick voice rumbled. "If there is, I would be more than eager to offer any assistance that I might be able to bestow?"

"No," Angelo said softly, tone touched with regret. "Nothing to be done, really."

"Are you positive?" Hank asked as he watched the young man rise. "Never close off an option, Angelo, till you've explored every facet. You never know till you've seen every angle."

Angelo spared the older man a sarcastic retort. But his love life just wasn't anything he wanted to talk to with the older man. He just shrugged and moved around him to the door.

Hank followed a polite distance behind, doffing his coat on the rack as Angelo did the same, and then said, in a low voice, "This wouldn't be your, _-ahem- _pining for Ms. Guthrie, would it?"

Angelo froze in place, half way to the couch. He turned and looked at the blue-furred biochemist and arched one brow. "What did you say?"

"Angelo, your feelings for Ms. Guthrie run quite deep, obvious to everyone on this farm," Hank said, though his tone was both gentle and friendly, "Except perhaps to the object for your amour."

Angelo sighed, and ran his hands through his hair. "That blatant, eh?"

"Yes, Angelo. That blatant."

Angelo chuckled softly. "Hey, no big deal. She just brushed me off, an' thought of me as nothin' as a friend for three years. I'll cope," his voice was thick with bitterness, as he continued, "After all, when she started up withâ€| whatever that was with Jono, I backed off. He was mi amigo, and he â€| I thought it'd be good for him. Instead, he just broke her heart. Again and again."

Hank watched as the boy dropped back down onto the couch, "But you still cared?"

"Oh, si. But I still had to be a 'best mate', 'cause Jono needs

someone who can handle the Black Hole of Angst that he can be, and Paigeâ€| she needed a friend."

Hank shook his head, thick fur rustling softly, "You are a good friend, Angelo Espinosa."

"Am I?" Angelo asked sharply. "Good friends, while pining for their best friend's ex, do not have â€| whatever it was I had in the grotto with Gayle." He rubbed wearily at his eyes, and then turned those luminous blue orbs to the ceiling.

Hank's dark lips down turned in a deep frown. "Gayle? Jonothon's former intended and now uncertain emplate?"

Angelo nodded quietly, his eyes fixed on the ceiling as he began to ramble, "I coulda had either of 'em, Hank. Either of 'em. Jono wouldn't have stood a chance if Paige'd been cared for. Gayle wouldn't have to sit and _wait_ like Paige did for two years. I coulda offered either of 'em a chanceâ€|" He shook his head quietly, "All cause one self-absorbed Englishman can't stop mourning. Doesn't he know that half of what he's lost is living and _waiting_ for him?_"

Dark blue lips down turned into a moue of displeasure. "And yet, Angelo, you keep your distance? How long is since the dissolving of Mr. Starsmore and Ms. Guthrie's relations?"

"Shit," Angelo thought for a moment, "Almostâ€| Four months now."

"Is sheâ€|over Mr. Starsmore?"

"As over as she can get, I suppose."

Hank's smile returned. "And yet, you stillâ€| keep your yearning for her company to yourself?"

Angelo looked up and arched a brow. "Yeah. So?"

Hank sighed in amusement as he reached up and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Looking at Angelo, he said, "Angelo, do you not think you've given her adequate time to recover? And perhaps now would be an ideal time to ply _your_ suit?" Two large hands came up as Angelo protested, and then silenced. "Maybe not now, not here, butâ€| When the moment is right? Make your feelings known?"

Looking long and hard at the inestimable Dr. McCoy, and then away, reaching for his blankets. "I'llâ€| I'll think about it," he said softly.

Hank chuckled at the young man's balking tone and shuffled off to the guest bedroom, knowing full well that the seed he'd planted in Angelo's head had begun to germinate and take root.

Could he? Would he? Did he dareâ€|?

Angelo couldn't answer that.

Not yet.

But soon.

* * * * *

When morning came, Paige was up with sun. Time to get up! Why? Not like this was any other day on the Guthrie farm. Today was special.

Today was her birthday!

She was now another year older, another year closer to being adultâ€| no, she didn't need to be closer to adult, justâ€| one more step to nearer to the world considering her an adult. She was mature. She was twenty years old today.

She stared out the window over the kitchen sink. She couldn't exactly go jogging in knee deep snow, but she took it in stride that this was Christmas Vacationâ€| for her at least! The rest of the students were at school, training under Callisto, who could even give Paige a good run for her money! The Morlock was just what she'd been looking for in a teacher; stern, driven, and willing to both push and encourage her. She liked having Callisto at the Academyâ€| it filled a gap that they'd had before.

But that was hundreds of miles away, and Paige was home and on vacation. She craned her neck so she could see the smaller house in the distanceâ€| the migrant farmhouse that Angelo, Cecilia and Hank were currently staying in.

She quietly pondered everything that'd brought her here. Joelle's pregnancy, the need for Angelo's presence and supportâ€| the last time she'd asked someone to the Guthrie home was when Jonothon had come back with herâ€| and look where they ended up! Broken up, broken hearted, justâ€| broken.

But things had gotten better since then. She couldâ€| deal with Jono, and to an extent, Gayle as well. She couldn't really hate the other girl for what had happenedâ€| Jono and she had been involved before, and it was only natural that Jono would want to help herâ€| andâ€|

She couldn't really hate either of them.

It was finally over. The ghost gave up and she sighed softly as she felt the final shreds of her feelings for Jonothon drift away. She just hoped, that no matter what had happened, he could someday, one day, be happy with someone.

Even if it wasn't her.

So involved was she in her thoughts, she didn't hear the sound of footsteps on the hardwood floor of the kitchen. "Well, ain't we lookin' chipper this mornin'," came Sam's still-sleepy voice as he came down into the kitchen. Paige turned to smile at her brotherâ€| where he was still asleep, she was bright eyed, bushy-tailed, and ready to take on the world. She'd figured that being both in X-Force and being a hard-working country boy would help him get out of bed in the morning, but no. Sam could get up earlyâ€| but he preferred sleeping late.

"Good mornin' to you too, Sam," Paige said as she put the coffee maker on and leaned against the counter, watching her brother slowly rouse to the scent of the java brewing.

"So how does it feel ta be twenty years old, nah?"

"Same as Ah did yesterday when Ah was still nineteen. Anxious."

Sam's brow arched up lazily. "Anxious? Ah thought that Joelle was the one havin' this baby, not you." He stood watching the coffee brew, glancing sidelong at his sister.

Paige laughed lightly, but only said, "No babies for me. I've got things to do before settlin' down."

Sam's expression shifted slightly—his blue eyes became a touch worrisome, "Y' sure 'bout that, sis?"

She blinks at him a moment. Sure about not settling down? Yes, very! "Yeah, Sammy. Why'd'ya ask?"

Sam let his own baby blue's drop to contemplate the pot of coffee before him, as he weighed his answer, "Well, Paige, Ah know it's— it's been a while since ya and Jono— split up," he tried not to wince as she abruptly frowned at his apparent attempt at breakfast conversation, "And then ya brought Angelo down here— Ah gotta wonder if yoah not bouncing back from Jono with yoah friend Ange."

Paige's frown did not abate. She looked over the cold perfection of the snow drifts—which were sure to be ruined later by the lil'uns. "Sam," she began evenly, "Ah don't feel lahke that about Angie. He's mah friend. Mah best friend. That's all."

"If yoah sure, Paigey," He sidled a little closer to her and put his arms around her shoulders, "Ah just don't want to see yoah heart broken again."

"Ah am, Sammy. An' ya won't." She turned, holding her toast carefully in one hand (so she didn't roast Sam's chest hair) and hugged him.

They enjoyed the remainder of their breakfast in peace.

* * * * *

The birthday party was nothing out of the ordinary—cake and singing and a loving family. Angelo was very much out on the periphery, watching it all. He and Cecilia were the two obvious strangers, and shared a strange camaraderie that way, while Hank seemed able to make himself at home in any gathering, and the kids seemed to love his boisterousness.

But in all the light and cheer, he had eyes for one person—and it was Sam.

Yes, Sam kept staring at him. It was the type of stare that usually preceded a shotgun being shoved up one's distended, gray nostril and the pop quiz of 'And just what are your intentions toward my

sister, Mr. Es-PIN-osa?' shortly following that gunmetal-to-the-sinuses treatment.

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Face _it_, Angelo grumbled inwardly, _Hank was right. You've got a neon sign brighter then 'All Nite, All Naked, All Nickels' from Times Square over your head, and it reads, 'I'm sharking for your sister. Hurt me.'_

He hated it when Hank was right.

And so as the clean up came and Paige was taking stuff upstairs and the kids were all getting ready to play out in the snow for the evening, Angelo slunk out under the cover of noise and wrapping. He went to get his coat from the house they'd been set up in, and then went trudging down one of the paths that had been stomped clear over the winter. He didn't know where it lead, but he followed it, regardless.

An hour later, he found himself staring over the valley from one of the cliffsâ€”a glorious view of a pristine, untouched valley was laid out before his eyes, and the snow was alight with the colors of almost-set sun.

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Jesus. No wonder Paige thinks the country's so damn gorgeous.

—

He stayed there for the duration of the sunset, quiet and thoughtful, just soaking up, for the first time in his life, a scene of natural beauty.

So engrossed, he never heard the soft crunch of snow, until the gentle voice from behind, "You have any idea how long you've been out here?"

He started a little and turned his head, craning to look past his hood, till finally he just stood and turned. And there was Paige. She was even wearing her brand-new deep-blue winter coat that she'd gotten from her brother Josh. It brought out the gold in the hair, even in this dim light.

She arched a brow, and then says, "Your tongue frozen, Ange?"

He said the first thing that came to mindâ€”"I don't know. Wanna kiss me and see?" It was a throwaway line. Nothing suspicious, not at all.

She snorted softly, and says, "In your dreams, Ange."

He paused a bit, and decided this might be an opening as he stepped over, his breath misting as he spoke, "You better believe it."

She didn't take him seriously, that much was obvious by the way she rolled her eyes and punched him lightly in the shoulder. Totally ignoring his teasing, she said, "So what brought you out here, anyway? The view? Never took you for a tree hugger."

"Yeah, well, I gotta hug somethin' sometimes," he drawled in return. God! What made him this way all of a sudden? _It's Hank. He got me thinking about it and now I can't shut my Goddamned mouth! _

--

Paige just chuckled softly, and didn't seem to be too aware of his internal dialogue. She moved a little closer to the edge, and then offered softly, "Y' know, I brought Jono up here in the autumn, when he came home with me." No matter that Angelo's heart sank to about the level of his snow-encrusted boots, Paige continued, "It's funny, being here againâ€"except with you."

"Oh?" He arched a brow, as she sighed softly. He didn't like that sigh. It was too wistful. _Don't tell me you're still pining for him! _"How is it different, Country Mouse?"

She shrugged a little, as she stood beside him. The shoulders of their jackets brushedâ€"he could hear the soft whisper of cloth over cloth. "It just is. It'sâ€" everything isn't as confusing. Iâ€" she trailed off, turning and meeting his eyes, gaze unsure. "I know how I feel about you?"

It was not a statement. It was a question. She didn't know.

He took a breath, the chill suddenly stinging his lungs. He took a step closer, turning to face her, his blue eyes intense. "I know how I feel about you, chica," he said softly. The soft clouds of their breath mingled, and he was sure that he could feel her heart racing. Or was it his own?

Unbidden, his hands moved of their own accord. One slid around her waist, the other slid up over her shoulder and brushed her hood away, cradling the back of her head tenderly. She yielded to his touch as they moved closer stillâ€"he could feel her breath against chin, against his mouth.

"Ah'm tired of hearin' the words, Angelo," she murmured, eyes were half-lidded as her arms came around his thin form. "If you care, then show me," she finally whispered.

And show her he did. Her lips were just as chill as his, but they soon warmed each other up, arms holding tight as mouths parted and he could still taste the chocolate birthday cake on her tongue.

Hungry for his touchâ€"for any touch, really, sadly enoughâ€"she went from sweetness to passion in the time it took for her to draw a breath, her arms tightening around him, and he responded in kind, ardor setting his blood racing and warming his skin.

For a crystal moment, everything stopped and was total perfection. No matter that they were cold, and Angelo's feet would shortly go numb if he stood still any longer, it was perfection. The kiss, the touch, the embraceâ€"all was perfect.

As it broke, he whispered her nameâ€" "Paige?"â€"and in that single word was a torrent of emotion and longing and the perfection of the moment remained as she opened her mouth to say somethingâ€"something he'd he'd been waiting to hear for the last three years!

And then the roar of Sam's blast field ruined it.

The two sprung apart like a snapped guitar string, both flushed and hot-handed and breathing a little too quickly to be considered truly innocent. They looked once at each other, and then Paige's eyes turned out over the valley as she tugged her hood back over head and Angelo just looked down at his boots, before he finally glanced up to see the blazing farmboy and junior X-Man rocketing toward them.

—

_As God as my witness, _Angelo thought with remarkable calm, _I swear I will someday throttle the holy living shit out of Sam Guthrie._

--

Finally the boy came into range, and set down beside the two. A glance was spared them both, and then he announced, "Joelle's gone into labor."

"Labor!? She's almost a week early!" Paige exclaimed as she whirled, intimate moment gone and forgotten in the light of the new information.

"Ah know that, Paige! Now come here, both of ya! I've got to get ya both back. We may have a bit of a wait ahead of us, but Momma wants you back there."

Sam moved over, sliding one arm around Paige, and then motioned for Ange to come over and do the same. Angelo looked briefly at Paige, hoping for something, anythingâ€|

She could not meet his eyes.

He felt his heart drop, even as Sam's blast field roared to life and left the cliff and that perfect moment behind him.

* * * * *

Paige was normally a reasonable, rational, calm young woman.

Normally.

However, right now, her heart was still racing a mile a minute.

She kissed him. Or had he kissed her? She wasn't quite sure where it'd started, and even though she'd told Sam different this morningâ€|

She wasn't even quite sure of how she felt for Angelo!

Around her, the house was abuzz with activity. Cecilia and Hank had already prepared for the Caesarian that the malformedâ€"

No! She couldn't think 'malformed'. The baby was a mutant. Just like Angelo. Just like Jono. Just like Penance.

Just like her.

But it was going to be blatant. Obvious. Unable to hide with a thin layer of skin between the world and her mutant self.

She suddenly had the oddest urge to greet this baby husked and inhumanâ€”if just so someone just like her saw her into the world. But then she realized that since Hank 'Beast' McCoy would be aiding the delivery, it would be all right.

Even if it wasn't family.

She looked out over the living room and her gathered family. Most of the kids were allowed to stay upâ€”it wasn't like there was going to be school in the morning! And so, her brothers and sisters were half-dozing and awaiting news on the baby.

Angelo had stepped outside for 'air'â€”more likely, he was sucking on one of his disgusting little cancer sticks.

Of course, she did have to give some credit to himâ€”no matter what her Momma had said, kissing him was not like licking an ashtray!

She giggled to herself at the absurd thought, and looked up to her sister's room. Sam paced at the stairs and sighed. "How long they gonna be up there? It's a simple operation, right?"

"Yes, Sam. But they had to get her ready first and make sure nothing bad happened with the baby," Paige said patiently. "C'mon. Ya sat through everyone else bein' born. You ought to be able to handle this."

For a time, he didn't respond. And then, a tiny, meek sentence escaped him. "Ah'm an uncle," he said, very softly, as if it had been the first time that this thought had even occurred to him.

Paige couldn't help but laugh and go over to her brother, and hug him tightly. "An' a fine uncle ya will be, Sam Guthrie. Now sit down and shut up, or Ah'm gonna belt ya," she murmured against his chest. At least it was a distraction from Angeloâ€”

And then, the stairs creaked. Not that this was anything unusual, as they were very old stairs and had been subjected to over ten Guthrie boys and girls running through the house, but they didn't creak like that unless all three-hundred-and-then-some pounds of furry blue Beast was on the stairs.

"Now, children," he intoned softly, "If you'd like to see your niece, you're going to have to wait a bit. She's sleeping with her mother. However, Sam, Paige, your mother wants to see you upstairs."

The two mutant siblings nodded, and went upstairs after the older mutant and into Joelle's room. Their younger sister was sweaty and blotchy-cheeked, but none the worse for wear, her blankets piled carefully around her and the soiled linens already in a bag and gone. Beside her was her mother, her hands clasped carefully before her.

And there was Cecilia, a tiny swathed bundle in a bassinet before

her. "Come meet your niece, Anna," the reluctant X-Man offered as she stepped to the side.

The two looked down on the red-faced, sleeping bundle. They couldn't miss the obvious signs of her mutation—a trio of tiny nubs ran from her brow to her hairline and presumably vanished beneath the soft thatch of brown hair that was a few shades darker than Joelle's.

But like any red-blooded American woman with even a whit of maternal instinct, Paige couldn't help but breath, "She's beautiful, Joelle."

Joelle did not answer. Her dark eyes were turned elsewhere, and Cecilia frowned slightly, and exchanged looks with the troubled Widow Guthrie who stood beside her bed.

Paige set her jaw silently, while Sam's eyes drifted to the floor.

"Your baby—your daughter—is beautiful, Joelle. As beautiful as her momma is," Paige began, and ignored the aborted attempt by her mother to say something to stop her harsh words. "And if you can't see that, then you don't deserve her."

Joelle still said nothing. She merely looked at a particularly interesting patch of carpet, staring hard as if to burn a hole through it down to the main floor of the house and into the cellar below.

Sam looked between his two sisters, and then says, "Ah think everyone needs to get some shut-eye. Paige's jaw was high-wire tense, and without another word, she turned on her heel and walked out of the small bedroom.

"Paige—" Sam began, as soon as he was out of the bedroom, ignoring Hank closing the door behind him.

"Ah don't wanna talk about it, Sammy. Ah don't," Her voice was low and aching, "want t' know that what mah own power denies me she's just gonna treat like trash!"

Sam stopped dead behind her. "Paigey?"

She didn't answer. She just kept walking, grabbing her coat from the rack and tugging it on quickly before vanishing out into the snow.

—

Why is it, she wondered, that God seems to reward the sinners, and make the righteous suffer? Why does God see fit to give that cold-hearted girl a baby—and make it so I can never have such a thing? Was this the price of being a mutant? Of fulfilling my dreams?

—

God's answer was the soft touch of tiny, crystal snow flakes across her face—and the voice of a friend.

"Chica?"

* * * * *

He'd steered cleared of the birth. Very clear.

There were days that Angelo Espinosa wondered, if indeed, he had that touch of death. None of his friends had lived to see twenty-one. His father, gunned down on his porch. Figuerra's Boys. Torres. All of them, in some what, had death touch them.

And then, with Generation X. How many times had he narrowly avoided it? A hole in his chest, an energy burn, being stranded on a raft in the middle of the ocean, a marrow-sucking monsterâ€|

All of these things had touched him and left their mark with a small reminder.

—

You've gotten this far, but I'm still on your heels, chico.

—

And so, at the birthing of Paige's nieceâ€|the next generation of both the Guthrie Clan and the next in the long line of Mutantsâ€|

He didn't want to touch the baby too. Not with his corruption, not with that taint of death.

And so, outside, he smoked. He went through three cigarettes in quick succession until even he couldn't stand the thick coating on his tongue and the rush of the carcinogens in his blood. And so he just stood. And waited. And felt the chill of the winter night cool his hot skin.

She'd kissed him.

Or had he kissed her? He wasn't quite sure who'd started what, all he was sure was that he'd he probably shouldn't have smoked those damn cigarettes because if he hadn't, he could've still tasted the sweetness of her mouth and the remains of chocolate cake on her tongue.

He chided himself briefly, kicking lamely at a snow drift. Stupidâ€|that's what it was. Stupid. She was just hungry for touch, for love, forâ€|

For everything Jono had denied her.

—

Goddamn bastard!

—

It all came back to him, didn't it? Still did! Angelo stalked around the farm house in his sudden restlessness, blue eyes shifting to a muddy, indistinct red as he felt his ire rise. _Stupid piece of shit

Brit pathetic bastard who didn't know what had been sitting right under his big nose and waiting to give him everything he could have ever wanted in a girl, everything he could desire; beauty, intelligence, love, affection, passion, companionship, friendshipâ€”_

--

Everything Angelo wanted.

As he rounded the house, legs now cold beneath the wet denim of his jeans, he heard the door slam, and saw Paige plow out into the cold on her own.

-

What the hell?

-

Shouldn't she be inside? Basking in the light and warmth of her family? Of her newest relative in the extended network of the clan? Why was she out here, pushing and plowing and rubbing at her eyes and muttering to her herself?

He sighed softly. Sir Angelo, White Knight to the rescueâ€¦

He again pushed through the knee-deep snow after her, and once he began to catch up, he called out, "Chica?" to get her attention.

She stopped and whirled, hair flopping against her shoulders and against the confines of her hood. "Ange?"

His lips turned up into a slight smile, as he kept on his dogged course, over to her side. "Who else speaks Spanish 'round here, eh?" He asked, his tone kept carefully lightâ€”he could see the pain in her eyes.

"Well, other than meâ€¦ and Hankâ€¦ and Ceciliaâ€¦"

He mock-wincing, and nodded. "Okay, point," he acquiesced. He settled beside her as she began to walk again, pushing slowly through the snow. He let the calm settle between them for a time, and then simply asked, "What's wrong?"

"She's got a beautiful baby, Angelo."

This was no the answer he was expecting, or looking for. "Joelle's baby?" Well, this was a no-brainer, Ange. Who else just gave birth?

"Yeah. Named her for our grandmotherâ€”Anna."

He nodded. "Was named for my great grandfather, actually. Never knew him." He had to keep her talking, otherwise she'd just bury it down and not speak and let it fester till she had an ulcer. That's how she worked, and he'd played this game for two years knowing that.

"Ah'm not named foah anybody," she said thickly, her voice getting more strangled, "But Joelle saw fit ta give her somethin' of a

giftâ€"since she ain't gonna give her anythin' else. Not love, not touch, not anythin'â€"

He stopped and reached out to catch her wrist, holding her hand delicately within his as he came around to face her. "What happened?"

Tears left red, angry tracks as they wended their way down Paige's chilled face, and the young woman sniffled msierably, "Ah told her, Ange, she had a beautiful baby. An' it didn't mattah t' her 'cause it was a mutant baby. Just because she had a funny lil' ridge on her brow, an' Doc Reyes says that her legs are gonna change from 'normal' ones, anâ€"and I told her that baby was beautiful and she was Angie, and she wouldn't say anything, wouldn't look up, wouldn't acknowledge that was her daughter, her flesh and blood! And all Ah could think, all Ah could do, was wonderâ€"why did God see fit ta take that away from me, an' give it to someone who's just gonna throw it away?_"_

--

Paige took a breath, gave a harsh, choked sob, the sound liquidy from the fact that she was sniffing and it was cold and so her drew her closer to warm her up. She settled into his arms without complaint, and he murmured in Spanish to sooth her, apologizes and comfort while she sobbed against his shoulder. "Ah want a family, Ah do Angie, Ah do, an' Ah want t' be a momma mahself somedayâ€"but mah powers won't let me. An' then she gets this little life given ta her and all she's gonna do is shit on it and be done with it! She don't deserve a chance like thatâ€"An' lil' Anna don't deserve that kinda mommaâ€"

"I know, chica, I know." He kissed her brow, smoothed away her tears, and rocked her there in his arms as she cried her pain out in the protective circle of his embrace. She stayed there for a time, and then tilted her face up to him quietly. He looked down, his eyes faded to a clear, luminous blue as they met hers in the darkness.

"Thank you," she said softly. "You're always there for meâ€"|" she smiled slightly as she tightened her arms around him. "And I've never even noticed."

He blinked a moment, and managed only her nameâ€" "Paige?"â€"before she was dragging him down for a kiss. It was sweet and briefâ€"not half so needy as before, but he returned it with all the affection in his soul he could muster.

Finally, when they parted this time, she wrinkled her nose at him, and asked softly, "And just how many packs did you smoke when you came out here?"

He chuckled softly, and kissed her brow. "I had three cigarettes. That's all."

"Yeah. That's all." She snorted softly against his chest, and then just let out a long, slow, breath. "Thank you," she said again.

"De nada." He paused there, content to just hold herâ€"and then tilted his head to whisper, "Y' know, Country Mouse, I'm freezin' my

cojones off out here. Y' wanna go back to the farm houseâ€|?"

She paused, and then shook her head as she tugged his armâ€"toward the migrant house. "C'mon. We'll go get warm."

He followed obediently after, keeping one of her hands in hisâ€"a tenuous link between the two of them.

When Hank and Cecilia returned, hours later and tired and worn, they didn't notice the two bodies curled up on the couch in the darkness, warming each other under the blankets and quilts, sleeping the unfettered sleep that only comes to the young and in love.

* * * * *

Paige was not up with the dawn. This was a great rarity, really, and so had to be noted. She woke about nine o'clock and shifted in the tiny space she'd slumbered in and then nestled close to the body-pillow she had next to her.

No, wait. She could feel ribs, arms, jaw and stubble. Therefore, this was not her body-pillow.

It was an honest-to-God body.

More importantly, she knew who the body belonged too. The soft, velvety texture to the skin, the scent of smoke that clung to the brown hair, the rough, stubbly chinâ€"it was Angelo.

Angelo.

She's crawled into Angelo's bed? No, he was on the couch, in the migrant house. And sunlight was pouring out the windowâ€|andâ€|

She'd slept with Angelo?!

She was suddenly very wide awake. He made a small, pathetic noise that was akin to 'let me sleep another fifteen minutes, ma!' and tightened his arms around her.

"Ange?" she whispered softly but urgently, "Ange. Angelo!"

He made another one of those noises, and then one of his eyes cracked openâ€"they were brown. Dark, soulful brown.

Just like Jono's.

She felt his skin grow taut and shift under his clothes and under his touchâ€"and then the sweet brown eyes vanished beneath the pale glow of the blue that occurred whenever he was using his powers. He blinked a couple of times, clearing the sleep from his mind, and then yawned softly.

"Buenosâ€|" his voice faded into another yawn, and then he just mumbled, "G'morning."

She chuckled softly, and then sat up slowly. "What time is it?"

"Damned if I know. Y' just woke me up."

She sat up and looked out the window. "Mah Gawd! The sun is up! Mah family's probably all awake. They're gonna wonder where I am!"

And where she was last nightâ€|

She stood up, and without hesitation, tore off the outter layer of skinâ€|revealing a Paige dressed differently then before. She kicked the skin beside the couch and Angelo blinked blurry eyes are her. "Ah gotta go." She said, leaned over and kissed his cheek, and then grabbed her coat and scooted out the door.

How could she have done such a thing! Been so irresponsible! She jogged quickly over to the farmhouseâ€|and found that inside, the house was already abuzz.

Sam was pacing nervously in the living room, as most of the other Guthrie siblings were gathered there as well. "Sam?" Paige caught his attention with his name, "What's wrong?"

"Joelle. She's gone. Momma went with Hank ta find her. We think she went back ta Chet."

Paige's heart sank down into her shoes. "The baby okay?" she asked suddenly.

"Yeah. Damn girl justâ€| left her alone in the middle of the night. We don't know when she left 'r nothin'. Just know that she was gone." Sam cursed under his breath, looking away, his expression tight and pained. Fortunately, in his distraction, he didn't question where she'd been that morning.

"Paige," he finally said, "There's something ya need to know. About Joelle. And Chet."

Her heart remained in her shoes. "What about 'em, Sam."

"Paigeâ€| Chet nevah laid a finger on 'er."

Paige's blue eyes blinked for a moment as Sam reached out to take her shoulders, "Paige, we were gonna tell yaâ€| Momma just didn'tâ€| Didn't know how ta say itâ€|"

With a careless gesture, Paige smacked away his hands, "Tell me what, Sam."

"She's the oneâ€| she tried to kill the baby, Paige."

"_WHAT?" _Paige's world shattered, briefly for a split second, her eyes large and round as dinner plates. She pushed back from her brother.

This time, though, Sam didn't take her pathetic fightâ€|he reached out, gripped her shoulders, and forced her to sit down in Momma's old rocking chair.

The younger siblings began to clear to other parts of the houseâ€|they'd known, they knew what was coming. Lizabeth and Josh went into the kitchen, Lewis and Jedidiah took Ruth and the twins

outside to see if they could skate on the pond. Anything to get away from the scene about to take place.

"Now you listen ta me, Paige," Sam said softly, as he knelt down to be eye level with her. "Chet Woodsley never laid a hand on Joelle. Sheâ€| She ain't been right since Preacher left her," he took a deep breath, eyes finally breaking from hers, before he could continue, "Doc Reyes told me 'bout it. She'sâ€| she's tryin' t' find a man that won't leave her, Paige. Like Preacher did. An' when the baby came along, an' Chet was angryâ€| she did all that damage herself."

"Butâ€"Sam, Ah saw him! Ah saw himself mahself creepin' onto the property! He has a record for trouble, Sam!" Paige insisted, "He was askin' 'bout herâ€" "

"Wouldn't you?" Sam said tersely, and then took a breath slowly. "Ah know how this must seem, an' y' must be angry that we didn't tell yaâ€" "

"Damn straight Ah am!"

"But Paige, we didn't know she's go runnin' off soon as the baby was born. Ah know how important all of this is t' ya, 'specially after last night, an' allâ€"we didn't know how t' tell ya."

Before she could retort anything, a chill breeze heralded the opening of the door and the bulk of Hank McCoy stepping insideâ€"a slumbering Joelle in his arms.

Sam stood up straight and began to stride over, "How is she?"

"Weâ€| we found her on the Woodsley property. She must have started out this morning, to have gotten so far." Hank murmured softly, as he went without hesitation to the stairs. "We'll watch over her today."

Paige looked at her mother as she entered after Hank, her eyes tired and worn. She set her jaw, meeting the older Guthrie's gazeâ€"her mother just looked at her. And then glanced at Sam, who only looked away.

"Ah'm gonna go call Mistah Cassidy. We'll arrange foah tickets outta heah tonight if Ah can," she said icily, and then stalked out the door and back to the migrant house. She and Angelo would be gone tonight. She didn't need to be lied too. She didn't need to be coddled.

She didn't need to be here anymore.

* * * * *

Paige stayed with Angelo, Hank, and till the day after Christmas. Cassidy convinced her to stay another five daysâ€"and told her of Emma's return, news which wasâ€| confusing, to say the least.

But, she had her support, her comfort. She warmed herself with Angelo's presenceâ€"and his touchâ€"and spoke not to her family till Christmas day. And then, after that, it was only tense, wordless hugs and good-byes.

She refused to see Joelle.

But Annaâ€|

Anna, she was going to just not say good bye to. The child wouldn't forget her. But a quiet handâ€"Angelo's handâ€"at her arm, as she was packing up her things in her room, was suddenly guiding her out and to what had been requisitioned off as a nursery. And then, he whispered in her ear, "Tell her you love and that you'll see her again."

She didn't know what he did it, or what made him do such a thing. But as those sleepy, dark eyes cracked openâ€"still the milky blue of a newbornâ€"she sighed softly.

"Ah love ya, Anna, an' we'll be back someday. After all, ya mah first niece." She reached down, and stroked a fingertip along the soft skin of her cheek, and then stepped back. "Now you," she murmured.

Angelo whispered something soft in his parent's native tongue, and then looked over at his companion, luminescent eyes bright. "Time to go home, Country Mouse."

Home.

No, no matter what she'd been through here, no matter the betrayalâ€"this was still home. Maybe not for Angelo, but still for her.

"It's time to go back to school, Ange," she agreed, taking his hand and leading him away so the baby could slumber.

They went out and met Cecilia and Hank, who had already packed up the equipment they'd requisitioned from Muir into the Blackbird. "Ready?" was all Hank asked, as he stood on the boarding platform.

"Ready as I'll ever be," Paige said, and then went up the ramp.

She did not look back once the entire flight.

End
file.